Turn in Palestine
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Turn in Palestine

The U. N. Mediates

After three weeks of war in Palestine, truce talks are under way.

Israel and the Arab nations invading Palestine have accepted "in principle" the month's armistice ordered eight days ago by the United Nations Security Council. Both sides tied strings to the acceptance of the order; they said, "Yes . . . but." The U. N. Mediator in Palestine has worked hard to get Israel and the Arabs to agree on a starting time for the cease-fire.

The great question is whether a truce will lead to peace. Will the two sides somehow be able to get together on a lasting settlement—after a generation of failure?

The Security Council's "cease-fire" order came after the United States and Russia tried—and failed—to get stronger Council action to stop the invasion of Palestine. The order was based upon a British proposal. It called upon "all Governments and authorities" to do these things for a period of four weeks:

(1) "Order a cessation of all acts of armed force."

(2) Agree not to "introduce fighting personnel into Palestine" and the seven Arab League States.

(3) Refrain from giving "military training" to men of "military age" who may be brought into these countries.

(4) Stop "importing or exporting war material" into these countries.

Deadline

The Council gave Israel and the Arab states seventy-two hours (until 7 P. M., last Tuesday, N. Y. time) in which to reply. It threatened to apply sanctions—and as a remote possibility, armed force—if the order were ignored. Both sides met the Council's deadline. Their replies were heavily weighted with conditions—completely conflicting versions of what the truce would mean. The differences turned on these issues:

Immigration. The Israeli note to the Council said that Israel would comply with the ban on military training for immigrants during the cease-fire but that "its freedom to admit immigrants, regardless of age, will not be impaired."

The Arab note said: "It is inconceivable that the Security Council could have intended to place the Zionists in a position to profit by the period of cessation of hostilities in order to receive a reinforcement of men who, although they come to Palestine as immigrants, are in reality nothing but trained fighters."

Sovereignty of Israel. The Israeli representative at the U. N., Aubrey S. Eban, spelled out his Government's note to the Security Council. He said: "The provisional Government of Israel will not, either now or at any other time, take part in any negotiations with any authority or person concerning the existence and full independence of the state of Israel."

The Arab note said: "Any solution which does not insure political unity for Palestine nor respect the will of the majority of the population of that country will not have the least chance of success."

Council Decision

Despite these differences—and others—the Council on Wednesday decided that Israel and the Arab League countries had "unconditionally" accepted the four-week cease-fire order. Then the Council passed the buck. It turned over the job of fixing a starting time for the cease-fire —in consultation with Israel and the Arab states—to the United Nations mediator in Palestine.

The mediator is Count Folke Bernadotte, 53. He is a descendant of Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, a marshal under Napoleon. As vice chairman of the Swedish Red Cross, Count Bernadotte acted as an intermediary between Germany and the Allies just before the Nazi surrender.

On last Monday Count Bernadotte arrived in Haifa by plane from Cairo. He said: "I have come here to mediate." He consulted with Israel's Premier David Ben-Gurion and Foreign Minister Moshe Shertok. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday he talked with political leaders in Amman, Cairo and Tel Aviv. He said: "I am still an optimist." On Friday, from Cairo, Count Bernadotte sent the Security Council a cable. It said: "Question Jewish emigration into Palestine duration truce alone obstructing agreement two parties on effective date truce. I am exerting every possible effort achieve agreement. Hope succeed."

The Battlefronts

The truce negotiations come at a time of bitter fighting—but of fighting that has not yet taken a decisive turn. This is the general picture:

Israel's territory—the area allotted under the U. N. partition plan of last November—is practically intact. Most of the Arabs have fled from the Israeli-held areas. Where there were 300,000 Arabs (roughly half the number of Jews in Palestine) there are now 25,000. The Arab population in Haifa has fallen from 40,000 to 6,000. The Haganah—the Israeli army with a combat strength of 42,000—has not yet sent the bulk of its forces into action on the battlefronts outside Israel.

Arab forces have occupied most of the Arab territory in Palestine, but have not tried a frontal attack against Israel itself. Altogether there are about 33,000 to 43,000 Arab troops in Palestine. The most effective of these troops, by far, have been the men of King Abdullah's Trans-Jordan Legion. The only important victory so far was won by the Legionnaires—the capture of the one-square-mile Old Walled City in Jerusalem.

Last week in Jerusalem—Jews still hold at least half of the new city—there was desultory sniping. Fighting in Palestine focused on three other fronts. They were: first, the "life-line" road running from Israel to Jerusalem; second, the fringes of the Arab "triangle of strength" in the north (the triangle's points are Jenin, Nablus and Tulkarm); third, the dusty, cactus-strewn plain, around twenty miles south of Tel Aviv, where the Arab strip of the Negeb borders Israel. Every day hundreds of soldiers were killed or wounded. But all the fighting did not add up to a critical battle.

Flowing Oil

The fighting so far has not fundamentally affected the big-power interests—those of the U. S. and Britain—in the Middle East. True, oil shipments through the Israeli port of Haifa have been cut off, but production is continuing in the British-controlled oil fields in Iraq and the American-controlled oil fields in Saudi-Arabia. Shipments through the Persian gulf ports are unaffected.

But there is fear in Washington and London that a prolonged war might stir up strong Arab feeling against the Western powers and cripple oil operations. Thus both Britain and America want to stop the fighting—particularly because they fear that Russia might be the gainer if the fighting is prolonged.

Last week there was renewed speculation that the key to the situation might be Trans-Jordan. Britain is closely tied to King Abdullah. Britons command Abdullah's Arab Legion; Great Britain provides an $8,000,000 annual subsidy to keep the Legion going.

Although Britain has maintained that Abdullah is an independent sovereign, nevertheless it seemed clear that it was British influence which last week was a big factor in Abdullah's acceptance of the truce terms. Two important British decisions last week showed how closely London was connected to the Palestine situation. One decision was to halt arms shipments to the Arab states for the duration of the cease-fire. The other was not to allow any able-bodied Jewish men in Cyprus (24,000 Jews are in detention camps on the island) to leave for Palestine during the armistice.

Deal With Abdullah?

Now the feeling is that Britain may be persuaded to use her influence to get Abdullah to accept the fact of Israel and to modify his course accordingly. Then, the argument runs, an arrangement could be made by which Abdullah would take over most of the Arab parts of Palestine; Israel would retain the area assigned to her in the partition plan.

There are big obstacles to such a settlement. For one thing, Abdullah has made strong statements against Israel. Last week he said, "We will never, under any circumstances, accept a Jewish state." For another thing, Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin has shown considerable hostility toward Israel. But on both these counts there may be room for change.

It is pointed out that King Abdullah has shown no desire to risk his Legion against the full force of the Israeli Army, because if the Legion were destroyed he would cease to be a major sovereign in the Middle East. Moreover, there is little love lost between Abdullah and most of the other Arab potentates—among whom there are dynastic and personal rivalries.

With regard to Britain, Secretary Bevin is under strong pressure from sections of the Labor party and from the Tories, as well as from the United States, to use British influence to achieve a settlement.

AS THE U. N. TRIES TO BRING PEACE TO PALESTINE







The New York Times, Leo Rosenthal-Pix, Associated Press

The U. N. continued its efforts last week to find a solution for the Palestine crisis. Shown at Security Council table, left to right, are: Jacob A. Malik and Andrei A. Gromyko, Russia; Sir Alexander Cadogan, Great Britain, and Warren R. Austin, U. S. In the Arab group at lower left are: Mahmoud Bey Fawzi, Egypt; Isa Nakhleh of the Arab Higher Committee and Prince Faisal-al-Saud, Saudi Arabia. Representatives for Israel at lower right are: Aubrey S. Eban, chief representative of the Israeli Government at the U. N., Lionel Gelber and Dr. Mordecai Eliash.

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